Definition and selection of key competencies in Austria: country report on the BFS-OECD project DeSeCo

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Country report on the BFS-OECD Project DeSeCo

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Founded in 1963 by two prominent Austrians living in exile – the sociologist Paul F. Lazarsfeld and the economist Oskar Morgenstern – with the financial support from the Ford Foundation, the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, and the City of Vienna, the Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS) is the first institution for postgraduate education and research in economics and the social sciences in Austria. The **Sociological Series** presents research done at the Department of Sociology and aims to share "work in progress" in a timely way before formal publication. As usual, authors bear full responsibility for the content of their contributions.

Das Institut für Höhere Studien (IHS) wurde im Jahr 1963 von zwei prominenten Exilösterreichern – dem Soziologen Paul F. Lazarsfeld und dem Ökonomen Oskar Morgenstern – mit Hilfe der Ford-Stiftung, des Österreichischen Bundesministeriums für Unterricht und der Stadt Wien gegründet und ist somit die erste nachuniversitäre Lehr- und Forschungsstätte für die Sozial- und Wirtschafts-wissenschaften in Österreich. Die **Reihe Soziologie** bietet Einblick in die Forschungsarbeit der Abteilung für Soziologie und verfolgt das Ziel, abteilungsinterne Diskussionsbeiträge einer breiteren fachinternen Öffentlichkeit zugänglich zu machen. Die inhaltliche Verantwortung für die veröffentlichten Beiträge liegt bei den Autoren und Autorinnen.

Abstract

Corresponding to the requirements launched by OECD and the Swiss Federal Statistical Office in the project *Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo)* the paper provides an analysis of salient discourses, strategies and steps found at the national level for the definition of key competencies as the desired outputs of the educational system or as a basis for assessment.

The methodological framework of the report is based on an analysis of literature and selected documents covering the debate held and the policy adopted in Austria regarding the definition and selection of competencies, and on a small number of specific interviews with experts representing interest groups and the school administration.

The most noteworthy activities found in Austria were two long-term measures: The development of a new curriculum for the secondary lower level (1999 curriculum), which introduced a new mandatory competency notion in the sense of a complementarity between subject-matter competence and self-competence/social competence for this phase of compulsory schooling. Industry as well launched a process of several years that was designed to define the challenges and new requirements facing the system of education and submitted extensive suggestions for the definition of competencies needed, which are aimed at complementing subject-matter competence by methodological and social competence.

Zusammenfassung

Den Vorgaben des von der OECD und dem Schweizerischen Bundesamtes für Statistik im Rahmen des Projektes *Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo)* folgend besteht die Aufgabe des vorliegenden Papiers in einer Zusammenschau und Analyse wesentlicher nationaler Diskurse, Strategien und Maßnahmen zur Definition von Grundkompetenzen als angestrebte Ergebnisse des Bildungssystems oder als Basis für die Überprüfung.

Der zur Verfolgung dieser Aufgabenstellungen entwickelte methodische Rahmen beruht auf der Analyse von Literatur und ausgewählten Dokumenten aus der österreichischen Debatte und Politik zur Definition und Auswahl von Kompetenzen, sowie auf einer kleinen Zahl von gezielten ExpertInneninterviews aus den Bereichen der Interessenvertretungen und der Administration des Schulwesens.

Als hervorstechende Aktivitäten im Bereich des Schulwesens sind vor allem zwei längerfristige Aktivitäten zu nennen: Die Entwicklung eines neuen Lehrplanes im Bereich der unteren Sekundarstufe (Lehrplan'99), in dem ein neuer Begriff von Kompetenzen im Sinne der Ergänzung der Sachkompetenz durch Selbstkompetenz und Sozialkompetenz für diese Phase der Schulpflicht verbindlich gemacht wurde. Auch aus dem Bereich der Industrie sind weitreichende Vorschläge im Hinblick auf die Definition von erforderlichen Kompetenzen vorgetragen worden, die sich auf die Ergänzung der Fachkompetenz durch Methoden- und Sozialkompetenz beziehen.

Keywords

DeSeCo, Key/ Core Competencies, Education and Training Policy, Lifelong Learning

Schlagwörter

DeSeCo, Grundkompetenzen, Bildungspolitik, Lebenslanges Lernen

The BMBWK – as the responsible organisation carrying out the BFS-OECD project DeSeCo (Definition and selection of competences) in Austria -- subsidised the qualitative expert interviews and the literature review this contribution is based on.

Contents

1. Introduction and Methodological Framework

This report is based on an analysis of literature and selected documents covering the debate held and the policy adopted in Austria regarding the definition and selection of competencies, and on a small number of specific interviews with experts representing interest groups and the school administration.

In a highly targeted analysis, this report sets out to shed light on the questions that were raised in order to arrive at a conclusive international overview of the status of the definition and selection of competencies in the corresponding *Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo)* project launched by OECD and the Swiss Federal Statistical Office. It is the ultimate aim of the DeSeCo project to carry out a comparative international assessment of key or core competencies at the level of schools and educational systems, and also in the field of adult education. The national report is to reflect the current status and the positions in Austria and to provide:

- information on steps taken at the national level for the definition of key competencies as the desired outputs of the educational system or as a basis for assessment;

- identification of competencies considered significant for major spheres of life in the national framework as a step towards reaching consensus in an international framework;

- understanding about how the key competencies are embedded in the national educational and evaluation strategies and how they are negotiated between the different interest groups;

- insight into the national assessments of the DeSeCo project, in particular of the conceptualisation of the three generic key competencies: the capability to act autonomously and reflectively; interactive use of tools in the widest possible sense; successful participation in heterogeneous groups;

- insights into the methods of, and national experiences with, assessing key competencies.

The question of (new) key competencies carries equal weight at the level of the European Union, both in the consultation process on lifelong learning, and in the area of stepped-up co-ordination in educational policy.

Therefore, the work which has gone into the country report may be seen as a stage in promoting the Austrian debate and policy on developing key competencies, summarising the status quo and briefly outlining the different positions.

In a first step, the basic propositions derived from a provisional analysis of the expert interviews were presented and discussed in a workshop (for a compilation of these propositions by Kurt Mayer see the Annex).

2. Status Quo and Development: Key Competencies in the Austrian System of Education

a. Background: Some characteristic features of the Austrian system of competence development

In order to be able to understand the first reforms and the current debate on key competencies, a number of features which characterise the Austrian system of competence development are first outlined to provide a general framework and description of the status ex ante.

- General and vocational education

The Austrian system of education is characterised by a strong focus on vocational education, which starts at a relatively early point in the educational career (at the age of 14 or 15 years) and leads to the first formal qualifications after two to three years already. With regard to requirements and skills by level and by professional specialisation, the secondary higher level is highly diversified and requires adolescents[1] relatively early on to opt for one of the two dimensions. At secondary higher level, a well-established system of apprenticeship training exists alongside a well-established system of school-based vocational training, which has recorded the highest growth rates in recent decades. There are no formal academic requirements for apprenticeship training, while at Higher-Level Technical and Vocational Schools (*Berufsbildende Höhere Schulen, BHS*), qualified higher-level vocational training ends with an entitlement to enrol in university studies. Already at lower secondary level (age 10), the educational pathway branches out into secondary general school (*Hauptschule, HS*) with setting, and secondary academic school (*Allgemeinbildende Höhere Schule*). The - basically identical - curriculum of secondary general and secondary academic school, with differing standards, is designed to leave open all further options for "talented" pupils. In practical terms, this structure allows for a wide spectrum of standards, already in compulsory schooling.

This set-up determines to some extent the discourse on competencies in a two-fold manner:

- The goals or demands for the aspired minimum level of compulsory education are largely left to how much "pupil talent" there is. Minimum standards in terms of educational

[1] Cf. Description of the Educational Pathways in Lassnigg L (1998) Austria. In: OECD, Pathways and Participation in Vocational and Technical Education and Training, Paris, 81-116.

outputs do not exist. In many areas, ensuing apprenticeship training did not set any, or only very few, academic demands. Therefore, there was very little incentive for a certain part of the compulsory education system to raise the standards in respect of key competencies on a sustained and nation-wide basis. A de facto low-skill level is essentially compatible with the formal qualifications of apprenticeship training. On the other end of the scale, secondary academic school embodies the academic perception of general education whose prime focus is on enrolment in higher education. In this system, the profile of general basic education is subject to a pronounced duality, frequently manifesting itself in educational policy in the antagonism of selection versus furtherance.

– The overwhelming majority of adolescents in fact decide about their educational careers early at secondary higher level. Opting for vocational training to some extent implies opting against general educational contents (this is true in particular for apprenticeship training and intermediate-level vocational schools). In the debates on competence development, this polarity between general and vocational contents is an underlying theme into which the theory/practice trade-off ties in. However, the Austrian system does not imply a general bias for or against vocational and general education in terms of prestige, some areas of vocational training carry less prestige than general education, whereas some areas are more prestigious. Moreover, any such assessment depends also on the perspective adopted by the players. In general terms, one may infer from this structure that the debate on competencies is characterised by a polarity between vocational and general education.

- General educational objectives and detailed allocation of contents in framework curricula

In the Austrian system, most of the educational objectives and teaching contents are laid down and specified in detail in curricular ordinances. A qualified parliamentary majority is needed to amend the legal bases governing the educational objectives, hence requiring a high degree of social and political consensus.[2] The objectives and contents are regulated by a dualistic structure:

- One the one hand, the general objectives are laid down in legal texts. These general objectives refer in an all-encompassing manner to the range of key competencies which are also addressed by DeSeCo.[3] These objectives are important points of reference in

[2] Until the 1990s, the general logic of this structure, with some differences, applied also to universities, where four levels of content regulation existed: the University Studies Act, special studies acts, study regulations, study plans. Apprenticeship training is subject to a double regime of content regulation: school-based training follows the model of the school curricula, company-based training follows the professional profiles and the examination ordinances. The establishment of "Fachhochschulen" (special post-secondary colleges) has created a new form of content regulation in Austria, i.e. that of accreditation of decentrally created qualification profiles which must meet certain general criteria.

[3] §2 School Organisation Act *("Schulorganisationsgesetz"):* It is the task of school (1) to contribute to the development of the gifts and talents of young people in accordance with ethical, religious and social values and

the educational-policy debate, signalling, for instance the comprehensive educational claims of public schooling. At the same time, the missing link to their practical implementation, their lack of specificity and empty-formula character have long been a topic of debate.

- On the other hand, the curricular ordinances assign the contents of teaching to the different subjects in a highly detailed and specific manner, which then form the basis for the design of teaching aids (especially textbooks). Although they are framework curricula, which are implemented by the teachers by planning and selection, the allocation of subject-matters – in particular via textbooks – plays a much more important role for practical regulation than the general objectives.

For all practical purposes, this system is extremely complex: A lot depends on how it is handled, though there is no transparency about how this is done. It is both highly regulated and flexible at the same time and forms a framework for comprehensive debate on the competencies to be acquired in education.

- Nation-wide formal qualifications in specialised vocational training routes with hierarchical grading

Formal qualifications obtained from vocational training are to a large extent laid down in provisions and establish a nation-wide system of skills which is reflected in the structure of the labour market. An important element in this system is subject-matter competence as described by curricula and training regulations. School leavers are supposed to be directly employable after completing their training. This structure puts a strong focus on the usability of training and establishes an element of "external control" of the educational system by the requirements of employment. This has fomented a lot of questions and debate:

- The degree of specialisation and the immediate usability of these formal qualifications, interacting with a changing world of work, has fuelled an ongoing discourse: How to design the relationship between (static) bases and (more dynamic) uses?

- A second discourse relates to the possible implementation of the general educational objectives, such as political and democratic objectives, but also communication skills and

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beliefs of what is true, good and beautiful by instruction that is adjusted to their stage of development and the educational pathways they have chosen. It is to equip young people with the know-how and skills required to cope with life and their future professions and educate them to acquire education self-reliantly. Young people are to become healthy, hardworking, dutiful and responsible members of society and citizens of the democratic and federal Republic of Austria. They are to acquire the ability for independent judgement and social understanding, become open towards the political and ideological thinking of others and empowered to take part in the economic and cultural life of Austria, Europe and the world and to share in the common tasks of mankind in a love of freedom and peace. (http://www.bmuk.gv.at/pdb/cgi-bin/Ges.cgi?Templ=ParagraphDetail.html&Gesetz=2&Abschnitt=1&Paragraph=2)

an ability for critical thinking, in technical/vocational training: How much general education beyond usable training or qualification should be aimed at?

With its clear focus on the practical usability of what was learned, vocational education (in particular apprenticeship training, but also vocational schooling) essentially adheres to an education and training concept which is geared to the *ability* aspect implied by the competency notion ("what you can do" as against "what you know"). At the same time, it has been repeatedly criticised that subject-matter knowledge (e.g. in examinations) is accorded special weight, and that the competency concept pursued is highly individualistic (i.e. oriented on the achievements of the individual).

The formal qualifications obtained from technical/vocational training are de facto hierarchically graded, from apprenticeship training to intermediate technical/vocational schools and higher-level technical/vocational schools. This hierarchical order does not necessarily reflect the realities of working life today, but suggests different levels of competence, which are still significant for the education and labour markets, although mechanisms designed to promote permeability have been established.

The close link between formal vocational qualifications and initial training, laid down in complex regulations (school organisation, Vocational Training Act, Industrial Code etc.), also forms a system of reference for the development of mechanisms to recognise informally acquired competencies. This largely predefines the scope for new mechanisms and may also impede the emergence and development of new systems designed to recognise competencies. Validating informal learning "...is a quite unresolved problem at present and (... it) all relates to the Industrial Code etc. ..... the *Berufsreifeprüfung* (entitlement to university enrolment for trained apprentices) in fact is a case in point ..... it covers a segment and, naturally, generates a wealth of problems, because people come and say, I have something too, and me too; which is taken up in the amendment process and must be aligned to the job profiles and be subjected to consultation with the Federal Ministry of the Economy and the Federal Ministry of Education ..... this is where things become interesting and difficult to negotiate between the different players ..... everything is in flux".

- Performance assessment through examinations

This basic structure does not provide for an objective assessment of what has been learnt.[4] Results are monitored through examinations, the formal qualifications provide indirect information about aggregate system performance. Essentially, we are dealing with input control, where much

[4] Karl Heinz Gruber (1996, p. H/2) points to the specificities of achievement assessment in Austria: Reservation vis-à-vis tests, high confidence placed in teachers, process control to ensure achievement, achievement being tied to organisational setting, integration of schools in a hierarchical system, accountability vis-à-vis superordinate instances, cf. Gruber K H (1996) *Leistungsbeaurteilung – Evaluation – Assessment. Eine Problemskizze. In: BMUK, Weissbuch zum Lehrplan'99. Wien, p.H/1-H/6.*

attention is placed on defining what should be taught or learned in the different areas of the educational system. In this process, the professional competence of teachers and school inspectors is a crucial factor.

External accountability is practised by legal compliance and quality control, partly by co-determination. In this system, accountability in the sense of quantifiable results does not exist and is not intended, given its operational logic. Until now, Austria has participated in international benchmarking projects to a very limited extent only.[5]

b. The discourse on key competencies in Austrian educational policy

Especially since the 1990s, a new dynamics has evolved against the backdrop of the characteristic elements which have been described. The preparations for accession to the European Union generated vital impetus. Amongst many other issues, a need for reform and renewal in education was perceived. Increasingly, questions such as the further development of the educational system were put on the political agenda, also at the international level. The diversification of the Austrian system of higher education following the establishment of *"Fachhochschulen*" (special type of post-secondary colleges) in a novel organisational set-up was an important step. The specific competence model of the new *Fachhochschulen* was put to a debate as against existing areas of training in secondary and tertiary education during the concomitant OECD review[6]. In their proposal, Peter Posch and Herbert Altrichter resorted to the *reflective practitioner* model. New perceptions of competence have an impact on the development of *Fachhochschule* study courses, especially the combination of subject-matter competence with dynamic skills and key qualifications.

In the first half of the 1990s, the dynamically evolving information and knowledge society and the pressure for change it exerted were increasingly perceived. The term *key skills* became an important catchword signalling a need to reform the Austrian system of education in manifold ways. On the one hand, this term was understood as criticism of the heavy leaning towards the conveyance of knowledge, which the comprehensive factual statements in the curricula suggest. On the other hand, this notion was also understood as criticism of specialised vocational training, felt to be lacking adaptability due to its heavy leaning towards usability. In spite of all the criticism about the vastness of subject-matter to be covered and the periodic calls for streamlined curricula and in spite of the criticism of specialisation and the argumentation about wider qualification profiles, there was hardly any systematic policy debate about the development of new

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[5] In the most recent OECD policy analysis, Austria does not figure in the assessment of the implementation of Lifelong Learning on account of lacking data. Cf. OECD (2001), Education policy analysis, 2001 edition. Paris: OECD.

[6] Cf. Background Report to the OECD Review BMWF/BMUK (eds.) Diversification of Higher Education in Austria. Background Report to the OECD, Vienna 1992.

qualification and competence models. Nor does the debate focus on the outcomes of education, but rather on structures and organisational set-ups, or on resource and staff policy.

Up to the present day, it is not clear, except to a small circle of practitioners and experts involved, what the term competence really means. It is fair to speak of a "confusion of tongues" as different terms (key skills, social skills, soft skills, cross-curricular competencies, dynamic skills, etc.) are used to express a given underlying issue: *The conceptualisation of new economic and social requirements* which should be taken up by the system of education. At the level of rhetorics, the *"renewal debate*" has been going on for a long time, however, practical consequences that would become tangible at the implementation level are much more difficult to achieve, not least because of the complexity of the problem, as was expressed in one interview: "a lot of lip service" .... "contained in every paper", yet "little has changed."

- Activities at a glance

However, a string of developments and initiatives were launched in the 1990s which can be associated with the debate on key competencies. The draft for the Austrian Report on Lifelong Learning[7] pinpoints the following lines of action in the area of basic qualifications, which may be summarised in three priorities. These lines of action may serve as a synoptic framework to structure the debate:

- Traditional core competencies (reading, writing, arithmetics): attaining a compulsory-school leaving certificate, post-compulsory vocational training for all young people. In recent years, the traditional core competencies gathered prominence in several contexts: First, in the context of youth unemployment, preventing the early drop-out from educational careers, and integrating disadvantages youngsters. Repeated criticism about adolescent job-seekers lacking core competencies came from the job placement agencies for apprentices. Second, in the context of participation in lifelong learning it is assumed that inadequate core competencies result in a lack of motivation, discrimination and exclusion. It is therefore necessary to improve initial education to secure a better start into the future[8]. Opportunities to strengthen the core competencies should also be seized for the 30-50 age group, if initial education was unable to lay the required bases.[9] Third, demographic development may require older age groups to work longer, which will often necessitate an improvement of their core competencies (secondary illiteracy). These debates are all founded on a poor information base, since Austria did not participate in the first IALS study. Participation in the follow-ups to the Adult Literacy Study (ALL) could significantly contribute to a better understanding of the problem at stake and prompt further action.

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[7] FM of Education, Science and Culture (2001) Country Report on the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, particularly the chapter on New Basic Skills for All, pp.9-32 (http://www.lebenslangeslernen.at/).

[8] The participation in the OECD Pisa Study is expected to furnish valuable information (http://www.pisa.oecd.org/)

[9] Cf. McIntosh S / Steedman H (o.J.) Low Skills: A Problem for Europe. Final Report to DGXII of the European Commission on the *NEWSKILLS* Programme of Research *Education and Training: New Job Skill Needs and the Low-Skilled.* Contract ERB-SOE2-CT-95-2006 (TSER), London: Centre for Economic Performance, LSE.

- New core competencies: raising standards and specialisation of *IT skills*; promoting *entrepreneurialism*, *social skills*, encounter with, and study of, *technological culture* through contacts with practice and cross-curricular approaches; promoting *foreign language skills*. These five fields of action contain a number of approaches and activities at different levels of dissemination and development. They have not all been systematically co-ordinated and may not always be sustainable They indicate important areas of competence development at the national level, even though the competencies sought are not always clearly defined and put in systematic order. In addition to a widely-scoped strategy for the implementation of e-learning and the *foreign-language drive,* which has been pursued for some years now, this area covers important activities such as *real or simulated contacts with practice* (practicals and co-operations, practice firms, company start-ups by pupils) and the promotion of *projects* in different forms and designs (e.g. the school experiment in engineering in the course of which actual projects had to be carried out and documented as a requirement for the school leaving certificate of a secondary higher technical/vocational school);

- Streamlining and adaptation of the curricula, in-service teacher training for new core competencies. In this sphere of action, mention should be made: first, of the 1999 curricular reform at secondary lower level (secondary general and secondary academic schools, especially for the lower cycle) whose major aim was to complement the conveyance of knowledge (subject-matter competence) by the dimensions of self-competence and social competence; second, the reform of the curricula of secondary higher technical/vocational schools ("tree model"), which aims at a reallocation of basic training (the stem) and specialisation (the branches); third, the *Fachhochschule* study courses, which are designed to integrate subject-related and interdisciplinary competencies.

This synopsis illustrates the main fields of discussion and activity in competence development; it is, however, based on highly diverging interpretations and perceptions of what competencies are. Some aspects will be addressed at greater detail in the following.

- Basic compulsory education

The views of what the minimum outcome of basic education should be are still rather unclear. The debate focuses on formal qualifications rather than on contents or competencies required.[10] In his policy paper, Fritz Bauer (2001, 20) advocates a stronger conceptual definition of basic education given the duality of fostering/developing and levelling/selection: "Its success will not be measured by the number of compulsory-school leaving certificates, but according to whether young people have a solid and expandable

[10] There is a certain lack of clarity even when it comes to formal qualifications, since at the end of compulsory schooling the fact of having completed compulsory education overlaps with the end of compulsory school. Therefore, it is not easy to single out, for instance, that group of persons in Austria which do not possess a leaving certificate from compulsory school.

base on which to build initial vocational training"[11]. But then, what should this base consist of? Which competency mix should be the ultimate outcome of compulsory schooling? Which diversification is desirable? Which minimum profile should be achieved? How much input of resources should be used to attain a given profile or a diversity of profiles? It is left open in this debate whether in terms of subject-matter competencies, the traditional core competencies are considered a minimum profile, or which additional competencies the latter should include. Based on an analysis of economic requirements in the USA, Berryman/Bailey (1992, 104) have pleaded to expect considerably more from the system of education than in the past: "The educational implications of these economic realities are stark, fundamental, and unavoidable. All students, not just some, now need the knowledge and skills required for middle- and high-skill jobs, whether or not they start they start their work careers in jobs of this sort (…). The need to develop relatively high levels of knowledge and skills means that the mission of our schools has to change."[12] In Austria, these and similar questions are being discussed only implicitly. The curricula set out a comprehensive programme within the framework of which a maximum is to be achieved; the individual careers will then reveal whatever this actually measures up to. An important aspect is permeability to higher-level schools at secondary higher level, and hence the formal identity of the curricula for both training routes, secondary general and secondary academic schools. As these curricula have set priorities in the form of core and add-on contents, the question as to the diversification of the aspired profiles and the differentiating effect on the further careers implicitly arises.[13] In concrete terms: Do priorities which have been set narrow down the desired minimum profile? These questions are expected to gain added relevance and depth in the light of the results of the PISA study**.**

- "New core competencies"

The classification according to five fields (IT skills, foreign languages, entrepreneurialism, social skills, technological culture) draws a link to real-world activities and to the more recent educational policy priorities in the European Union. It is neither consistent with the scheme on which the DeSeCo project is based, nor with the classifications used in scientific discourse.

In the debate that is held in German-speaking countries, the stress of the competency notion lies on the conceptual side, whilst the Anglo-Saxon countries place primary attention to competence-based assessment.[14] The use of this notion in Austria follows the germanophone accentuation. Although assessment is an issue of debate, it is not, or only indirectly, associated with the

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[11] Bauer F (2001) *Perspektiven einer Berufsbildungsreform für das 21. Jahrhundert. WISO 24 (1), 11-41.*

[12] Berryman S E / Bailey T R (1992) The double helix of education and the economy. Institute on Education and the Economy. New York: Teachers College (Columbia).

[13] Thonhauser J (2000) *Neue Lehrpläne. Versuch einer Beurteilung unter erziehungswissenschaftlichem Aspekt. Erziehung und Unterricht 150 (7-8), 841-851*.

[14] Hövels B (1998) Qualification and labour markets: Institutionalisation and individualisation. In: Nijhof W J / Streumer J N, Eds. (1998) Key qualifications in work and education. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 51-62; Wolf A (1995) Competence-based assessment. Buckingham: Open University Press.

competency debate. Here, the duality of general and vocational education manifests itself, as vocational education contains traditional elements of competence-based assessment inasmuch as examinations assess performance by traditional means but also take account of practical work accomplished. The interviews have shown, however, that the issue of weighting is controversial and that there is no systematic and general debate. According to Josef Thonhauser (2000, 848) assessment is one of two taboos in educational policy in Austria.

A second aspect to the competency notion is its contextualisation.[15] In the UK system of 'National Vocational Qualifications' (NVQ), for instance, the assessment of competencies is totally geared to practical use. The Austrian debate addresses this issue under the heading of *"practical relevance*", which in turn is an important issue in vocational training. The opening of the educational system and the creation or strengthening of links to the "outside world" are important motives in the general debate on key competencies. Employers and employees alike call for and support these links to the world of business, employment and society, though in different ways and with different priorities. There are manifold approaches and initiatives to enhance this contextualisation, their impact, however, e.g. how they tie in with classroom teaching, has hardly been studied at all. Bauer (2001, 26) considers these forms of training and vocational practice a vital source of innovation, but calls for more in-depth systematic studies as a preliminary requirement. Shortcomings have been identified especially in respect of practicals.

The 1999 curriculum introduced the competency notion systematically in the provisions which govern the system of education.[16] Terms such as *subject-matter competence* (in the context of knowledge transmission and independent pro-active appropriation of knowledge and its critical reflection), *self-competence* (development of individual talents and capabilities, being aware of one's own strengths and weaknesses, self-reflection) and *social competence* (taking on responsibility, co-operation, initiative, active participation) are used. The development of these competencies should be evenly balanced. The expression "dynamic skills" has been introduced as a summary term designed to cover both self-competence and social competence. Dynamic skills are meant to help solving problems constructively. At the time the curricular reform was launched in the mid-1990s, the term key qualifications was still being used.

In the 1990s, the competency notion was systematically studied by the Federation of Austrian Industry (*Industriellenvereinigung*) (cf. also chapter 4).[17] *Subject-matter competence, methodological competence and social competence* are the key terms used in this context.[18]

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[15] Brandsma J. / Nijhof W.J. (1999) Bridging the skills gap: The search for powerful skills, tools and techniques, in: Nijhof W.J. / Brandsma J eds.: Bridging the skills gap between work and education. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1-15.

[16] Dobart A (1997) *Schule macht Lehrplan. Grundsätzliches zum Lehrplan '99. Erziehung und Unterricht, 147 (4), 324-333.*

[17] *Volkswirtschaftliche Gesellschaft / Industriellenvereinigung (1997) Qualifikation 2012. Bildungsanforderungen für eine Berufswelt im Wandel. Wien*.

[18] This concept, which is more strongly geared to vocational training, has a different focus compared to the 1999 curriculum. The aspects grouped under self-competence have been attributed here to social competence and also

Subject-matter competence or basic subject-matter training ("being able to do something", "disposing of practicable know-how and skills")[19] is clearly rated as a crucial requirement for "employability"; however, it should neither lead to "over-specialisation" nor to "detached abstraction". "Two aspects are called for: insight, by way of selected special fields of application, into how people working in a certain profession think and act, and a general understanding of the larger picture in this field of work and related fields, so as to be able to familiarise oneself independently with new developments, to broaden one's knowledge and to acquire new abilities and skills".[20] Methodological competence is a crucial requirement for practically implementing and further developing subject-matter competence. Flexibility, self-directed learning, independent problem-solving and accountability are stressed as key elements of methodological competence. Social competence covers an openness toward the world and environmental awareness, as well as team spirit (including traditional work ethics) and communication skills. A recent position paper of the *Industriellenvereinigung*[21] narrows down the task of school, interacting with further education as an element of on-the-job and life-long learning and further education, to the achievement of "fundamental educational objectives": At the level of subject-matter competence, "modelling (including traditional mathematical, logical, physical and chemical concepts)" is stressed as significant. "Modelling is so important because the store of mental models acquired helps a person to understand how many things work or interrelate ("explanatory principle") and is a general basis for transposing these models to new fields of knowledge."[22] Moreover, a change of paradigms in education towards "alternative educational pathways" and "new forms of educational offers" (especially in the context of web-based multimedia learning systems) has been postulated.

The labour organisations have submitted a proposal to reform vocational training[23]. It favours a modular approach and distinguishes between the following pedagogico-didactical models:

- general education
- personality education
- technical education
- training
- vocational practice.

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to methodological competence, there is a stronger focus on methodological competence (which does not figure prominently in the curriculum).

[19] Ibid., p.43.

[20] Ibid., p.44.

[21] IV (2001) *ikt.skills_für neue arbeitswelten. Herausforderungen und Chancen im Bereich der Informations- und Kommunikationstechnologien (IKT), p.18.*

[22] Ibid., p.18.

[23] Bauer 2001, p.25-27.

The new key competencies are attributed to the area of personality education and circumscribed by self-competence, social competence, key skills and socially-related skills.[24] On the other hand, the modules of training and vocational practice are geared to the practical use and reflection of technical education, an area in which the acquisition of the new key competencies is to be systematically developed.

c. Measures already implemented

Two bundles of measures from this wide spectrum of features and problems of competence development in Austria will be described in greater detail in the following: The 1999 curriculum for the (general) secondary lower level, and increased reliance on project-based methods, which have been singled out as examples of best practice, especially in vocational training. Both measures were stressed most strongly in the expert interviews conducted for this analysis of competency development.

- The 1999 curriculum

The 1999 curriculum was developed over a period of several years by co-operation between academics, practitioners and decision-makers in the form of a project. It entered into force in the autumn of 2000 following a staggered timescale.[25] It was an explicit aim of this reform to take account of social changes with regard to new requirements for competence development at schools catering to pupils aged ten to fourteen. At the level of contents, this re-orientation was referred to as a ”refocusing of science and real-life orientation“ (Dobart 1997, 329): “The new curriculum is to give added weight to real-life orientation. However, science orientation, which has always been a crucial element of curricular design, is to be maintained”.[26] Science orientation represents subject-matter know-how, real-life orientation is to complement scholastic processes by introducing dynamic skills as “personality-driven competencies which are not bound to knowledge in individual subjects.” (Dobart 1997, 331). These new competencies were to fill the “general educational objectives” with specific content.

The 1999 curriculum defined five educational areas. They are designed as a steering instrument for implementing the new competencies in teaching. Interlinking the general educational objectives and the specific goals of the individual subjects of instruction, they are to constitute a

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[24] Conceptually, this proposal ties in with the Delors Report. Cf. J et al. (1996) Learning: The treasure within. Report to UNESCO by the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century. Paris: UNESCO.

[25] Important elements in this process were the installation of steering groups at federal and laender level for project management and the involvement of all stakeholders, the elaboration of a white paper (1996) in which the principles of reform were presented and disseminated (motives, objectives, procedures), testing its implementation in a “participation model“ of pilot schools (as of 1997); cf. *Kern A (1996) Von der Reformidee zum Weißbuch. Erziehung und Unterricht, 147 (4), 334-357; Schmidinger E (2000) Die Lehrplanentwicklung aus der Sicht der Steuerungsgruppe – Reflexion eines Prozesses. Erziehung und Unterricht, 150 (7-8), 794-802.*

[26] *Dobart A (1997) Schule macht Lehrplan. Grundsätzliches zum Lehrplan ’99. Erziehung und Unterricht, 147 (4), 324-333*.

framework for closer interrelation between the subjects of teaching, as well as a basis for cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary co-operation:

- Language and communication
- Mankind and society
- Nature and technology
- Creativity and design
- Health and exercise.

A second major innovation at the level of contents is an orientation towards the individual school. The curricular contents have been divided into core contents (2/3) and add-on contents (1/3). The add-on part is designed by the schools individually and should form a basis and opportunity for expanding school autonomy. The new curriculum offers a starting point for schools becoming learning organisations and incentives for team-building between teachers, etc.

Apart from re-formulating the contents, this reform was to advance or prompt the organisational development of the educational system. "The 1999 curriculum is part of a comprehensive concept of school development, which is characterised above all by:

- greater autonomy in designing the contents of teaching for individual schools,

- schools becoming open for new contents, forms of work and co-operation, and

- school partners being granted more opportunities for participation."[27]

In this way, the reformed curriculum was designed as a steering instrument for disseminating a novel form of knowledge presentation, more curricular specificity and new forms of work at school, team orientation between teachers and the motivation of pupils. By granting schools greater leeway in designing the contents of teaching within the framework of school autonomy, which was laid down in law in 1993[28], added weight was accorded to the principles of self-reliance and self-organisation.

Added responsibility at school level required corresponding quality assurance measures. Therefore, the reform of the 1999 curriculum went hand in hand with the development of a system

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[27] Ibid., p. 328.

[28] Compared to the curricular reform of the 1980s, the 1999 curriculum marks a change of trend, by aiming to condense and simplify the existing provisions. The 1984 reform, in contrast, ended in a considerable expansion of the curriculum in the form of didactic and methodological justifications.

of self-evaluation of schools.[29] A cornerstone in this process was the school development plan, which was, for the purpose of content monitoring, to spell out in concrete terms how the subjects and schedules were structured, and how learning and timetables were organised. The educational fields were to provide "guidance for implementation in subjects or fields of learning", to be covered in the school development plan as "major components of education".[30]

In the development of the 1999 curriculum is was clear to all stakeholders that the teachers as well as the school heads had a crucial role to play in implementing the new competencies. Social competence and self-competence can only be developed in a climate which itself is based on these competencies. At the same time, the reform had been prompted by external factors, by the need to respond to societal change, by experts and decision-makers, encouraged by international experience, "... there was no genuine need for action coming from the schools themselves", except for a small group of "pedagogical innovators" and "schools pursuing a pro-active educational policy". A need to step up the reform and renewal efforts was recognised only in the face of mounting competition between schools that is occasioned by the demographically-induced shrinkage of the reservoir of pupils. Gruber (1998, 16) qualified this approach as "rather traditional/bureaucratic, centralised and hierarchical". Securing the agreement and support of teachers by appropriate accompanying measures must therefore be seen as a critical factor. This point brought different critics to the fore who maintained that this climate was more or less non-existent, that several factors in the overall organisational set-up stood in the way of reaching that aim, and that the accompanying measures adopted so far were insufficient.

The traditional methodologies and role of teachers must be abandoned: New tasks are added, such as the definition of contents, which should be carried out in a team-based, cross-curricular and interdisciplinary approach; moreover, the role of teaching and of teachers is expanding beyond the transmission of subject-matter contents. In the interviews, the traditional views were characterised very poignantly: "... the teacher steps into the classroom, closes the door and teaches physics. He/she teaches physics, and not the pupils." Reference to new competencies and dynamic skills reveals the contrast. "..... the first reaction was: How am I to convey this to the pupils, this is the old perception , (....) transmission of knowledge" – I cannot teach them the new competencies, I have to make pupils experience them, (...) I have to organise my classes so as to challenge and demand dynamic skills, that was the challenge for the teachers." Lots of searching and uncertainty was generated in this area: How to go about practical implementation? Specific suggestions for implementation had to be made, in order to maintain the link between the

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[29] see Q.I.S. – Quality at Schools; http://www.qis.at/start.htm

[30] Dobart 1997, p. 331; the effectiveness of the educational fields for implementation is an item which is put into question, e.g. by educational theory, on the one hand because the provisions are considered as too non-committal (Thonhauser 2000, 847), on the other hand because – consistent with many empirical studies – the curricular requirements are considered not really significant enough for classroom instruction; cf. Gruber K H (1998) *Lehrplanreform in Österreich. In: Arbeitsgruppe der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Erziehungswissenschaft, Lehrplanreform und Schulentwicklung, Hamburg: mimeo, 15-19*; cf. also *Achs O et al., eds. (1997), Lehrplanreform. Neuvermessung der Landkarte des Lernens. Wien: ÖBV.*

small community of developers and researchers on the one hand and the schools on the other hand. Specific practical suggestions were made concerning e.g.

- interdisciplinary work
- team orientation
- individualisation
- project-oriented work.

These changes contrast with positions adopted by the teacher unions, with two different groups with different educational backgrounds and different standpoints (secondary general school teachers and secondary academic school teachers) being affected. "... Both groups "shared concerns" about additional workloads - possibly unremunerated and insufficiently covered by the service regulations - and about the implementability of educational challenges which could not be realised without additional resources, lower pupil/teacher ratios, less stringent provisions on the division of classes, or a reduced mandatory teaching workload."[31] In general terms, the compulsory (secondary general) school teacher unions welcomed the innovative features of the reform, whereas the university-trained academic school teachers were sceptical of or even rejected essential innovations[32], claiming that the competency notion lacked clarity.[33]

Asked about problem areas, all respondents mentioned the neglect of in-service training and the service regulations for teachers[34]. "The unions will maintain that this reform needs to be reflected in remuneration and the service regulations, and will therefore be included in the on-going debate

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[31] Thonhauser 2000, p. 843; The examples of extra work mentioned were first and foremost curricular work at school, the team-based planning of classroom instruction and increased differentiation and individualisation.

[32] As early as in the mid-1990s, a survey of the "activeness of school" at the educational policy level revealed in a number of factors a more innovative climate at secondary general schools as against secondary academic schools. 58% of the secondary general schools/teachers stated that they would "frequently" co-operate when planning for classroom instruction (as against 25% at secondary academic schools), cf. *Specht W (1997) Aktivität der Schule als Indikator für Schulqualität (HS, AHS). In: Haider G, Hg., Indikatoren zum Bildungssystem. Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, S.124-125.*

[33] cf. Ibid, p. 844. They criticised some of the essential concepts and justifications: real-life orientation, the constructivist approached, the emphasis on project instruction and group decisions, the link to quality development and the school development plan etc.

[34] In the interviews, the service regulations for teachers were a key issue in spite of the fact that the Service Code for *Land*-employed teachers had been amended in early 2001. The amended law replaced the "compulsory teaching unit model" by an "annual standard model" which looks at the work of a teacher from a holistic perspective and is to make it transparent from the beginning of the school year onward. The annual standard workload of a *Land*-employed teacher now corresponds to the workload of a civil servant of equal seniority for the period which corresponds to the school year. It is to be determined within the total number of hours that corresponds to the number of established posts allocated to the school on the basis of the number of pupils, within a range between 1) 720 and 792 annual teaching units (activities in contact with pupils) including all related statutory duties of supervision, 2) 600 to 660 annual hours for preparation and follow up of instruction, and corrections, 3) the difference between the sum total of effective annual hours and the annual standard for other activities that are part of the teaching workload
(http://aps-fsg.apsfsg.at/aktuelles_wechsel/ldg_gesetzestext.html)

about the service regulations....." after all, the new Service Code will also need to include some logic of remuneration for work accomplished, and this is still linked to hours which in turn are tied to subjects ..... after all, our people have to be qualified for something by which their work must be quantitatively accountable." Depending on the different positions, there are different views as to how teachers are to be persuaded to participate actively in the reform. The Federation of Austrian Industry has advocated e.g. a stronger link between pay and performance and a deregulation with respect to employment. If the present system of public-service employment of teachers were to be maintained, the new duties would have to be laid down in law, which has so far always required consensus between the employer (government) and the teachers' unions.

The interviews also suggested that the use of the competency notion is still very unclear and that it is not yet seen as a pressing concern, ".. if you ask secondary academic or secondary general school teachers today what they consider important, they will not necessary reply that they need new curricula or a focus on competencies." All in all, the concept of competencies and dynamic skills was to explicitly denote a circumscription and specification of a sophisticated notion of education ("education is more"), delimited from key skills, which are too specifically geared to economic usability, directly job-oriented or more indirectly related to employability. The competency notion relates to the development of the individual in an all-encompassing way and aims at social and political participation, as much as at a "positive basic attitude towards learning, which should be investigative, interested, curious, (..), constantly advancing the individual learning process and not waiting for things to be conveyed by inculcation."

- Dissemination of project methods

The use of project-oriented methods can be regarded as an important bridging strategy as the Austrian system of education is moving towards competency development. Differences in focus exist between general and vocational education. Owing to their orientation towards practical usability, project-oriented methods for the development of work-related action competence have traditionally had more importance in vocational education, especially at the interface with other economic activities, even though the divide between the traditional transmission of knowledge and/or performance assessment on the one hand and project-oriented work on the other hand persists. The use and enhancement of project-oriented methods has long been promoted also in general education.[35] At least 20-30% of teachers are estimated to have integrated such methods in their teaching.[36] A range of activities and projects at the interface between school and the economic and social spheres are being promoted in manifold ways.

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[35] Basic Decree on Project Instruction, ed FM of Education and Cultural Affairs, Vienna 1992; Project Guidance: http://www0.eduhi.at/projektleitfaden/index.htm; media kit for project instruction at Austrian schools "THE PROJECT": http://www.bmuk.gv.at/pnews/projekt.htm.

[36] According to a survey carried out in the mid-1990s at secondary general and secondary academic schools, 36% of the schools/teachers used project-oriented methods "frequently" (mentioned by 23% of the respondents, team teaching and interdisciplinary instruction were less widely disseminated), with an upward trend; cf. Specht 1997.

We have already described the wide spectrum of real or simulated practice in vocational training, from the company-based training module in apprenticeship training to practicals, apprentice training workshops and practice companies.[37] Project activities which are geared to real-life problems or to manufacturing genuine products in supervised team work are considered important. Special mention was made of a school experiment in engineering at secondary higher technical/vocational school level, where a six-month project is prepared, documented and presented by several students together as a core feature of their final examination, in other words the tangible outcome of five years of work. "There is, for example, a company which produces organic oil for chainsaws from waste cooking oil, it must collect the waste oil, store it, set up production and then distribute the chainsaw oil. All this, plus the reorganisation of the warehouse, safety precautions and transport logistics, etc. was managed by a group of students for a specific company, including investments and the business-management part....". Companies contribute by making tasks for project work available. ".. We get real-life business to deal with in project work, this is a highly beneficial process; ..... one class, for instance, has developed a waste water meter for a company which will probably take up serial production of this device, so the company actually benefits; this example was a very fortunate case in point, it will not be the rule for all projects, but we do address real-life issues and both sides stand to benefit a great deal".

Two conflicting orientations have been identified in vocational education: specialisation (immediate usability) versus breadth (orientation toward the fundamentals) of training, and practical versus school education. Vocational education is attempting to sharpen its focus on real-life problems whilst widening the training profiles in the curricula (cf. the "tree model"). In analogy to the educational fields contained in the 1999 curriculum, there is an ongoing debate about re-grouping the subjects in thematic fields.

In vocational education, competencies are understood as being instrumental and interchangeable with key skills (basic skills or cross-curricular competencies) in terms of a comprehensive work-related action competence, in which experience-based knowledge and tacit knowledge acquired in practical work are also important. The duality of vocational versus general education, of economic usability versus broadly-based individual, social and societal objectives is repeatedly referred to as an important context. On the one hand, duality and contradiction are seen as being increasingly superseded by complementarity, as society is transforming into a knowledge society. This view is stressed e.g. by the social partners (=represented interests of employers and employees).[38] On the other hand, there is a strongly rooted belief that these two lines of thought are contradictory. When it comes to personal competencies, the duality of independence and adjustment is seen as causing friction, "..... business and industry want independent and self-assured workers ..... but only within certain limits, they should be independent only when they are dismissed, but do as they are told at work, and self-reliantly, to boot; this bears many

[37] cf. chapter 2.b. of this report and the reference quoted there;
[38] Cf. chapter 3 of this report

contradictions .... I would therefore have to discuss the competency notion from the angle of freedom versus control."[39] A competency notion which touches upon the individual and personal sphere ".... can easily degenerate into prying into people's attitudes; now, we put a lid on such practices, as we examine at the subject-matter level and the other level, the above-lying competency level ..... does not carry that much weight .... of course, now you could argue that's a bad thing, because this other level .. remains low-key, or you could argue it is good, because it allows for more freedom."

d. Measures being planned and discussed

The different lines of action[40] which have already been launched or are on the drawing board in the areas of key competencies, new key skills and curricular development, have already been outlined. Rating current practice as insufficient, the represented interests of the social partners[41] have placed a strong emphasis on enhancing and expanding project methods and practical contacts as a means to develop competencies. Quality assurance and the development of (uniform) standards and performance assessments in education were mentioned as key issues in the context of school-based development.

The following general lines of action for future development should be singled out with a view to a definition and selection of competencies. They are interrelated; summarise, and extend beyond the scope of individual approaches and initiatives:

- quality development and quality assurance at school level;

- surveys to assess competencies;

- development of standards, indicators and benchmarks for controlling at an aggregate level.

The essence of the proposals and debates will be outlined in the following:

- Quality development and quality assurance at school level

While the definition and selection of new competencies in the 1999 curriculum was incorporated in a more comprehensive overall system of school-based development, this system has not been fully implemented in practice so far. The underlying concept is to support the implementation of new competencies by organisational development, based on the development of self-evaluation

[39] Cf. *Zilian H G (2000) Taylorismus der Seele. Österreichische Zeitschrift für Soziologie 25 (2), 75-97.*
[40] Cf. chapter 2.b. of this report.
[41] Cf. chapter 3 of this report.

methods at school. In parallel to curricular development, a comprehensive, internet-based system of quality assurance and development has been in preparation for a number of years.[42]

The core element in school-based quality assurance and quality development is a school development plan. Forming the basis for evaluation[43], it should include a mission statement, a school profile and a development strategy. "The school development plan is essentially a tool to be used at the transition from *input control* (curricula etc.) to *output* control. How does the school perform? Which principles does it subscribe to? Can it be distinguished from others? ... What may customers ask for on the basis of the school development plan? Schools should see themselves as service-providers, with pupils being regarded as customers who demand services." The specific implementation of curricular requirements by individual schools, e.g. the practical implementation of the educational fields and the definition of the add-on contents, are key elements of the school development plan.

Although the provisions regarding the school development plan and evaluation contained in the 1999 curriculum have not been generally implemented, owing to reservations and conflicting interests of teachers, initiatives for quality assurance and quality development, as well as experiences from pilot schools can be found in all areas of education.[44] There is a pronounced need to develop things further "... we have not yet arrived at a point where we could say: We have a school development plan which clearly spells out the direction we want to go, the measures we want to adopt, and which would accord so much significance to human resources development that the seminars people attend are geared to these objectives ..... for this we would need clear-cut objectives and goal-oriented management."

- Surveys to assess competencies

Ingrained in a system of traditional assessment of scholastic achievements by teachers[45], Austria so far has rarely participated in international assessments. Suggestions have been made to integrate school-based quality assurance and quality development in a monitoring system at the regional and national levels. Involvement in PISA (and possibly in ALL) could serve as a starting point, added by the development of national assessments.[46]

Critical opinions were put forward on the question of assessment in several interviews conducted for this report and in a number of analyses on the development and implementation of the 1999

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[42] Cf. http://www.qis.at/start.htm; http://www.qis.at/qn/

[43] *Thonhauser J (2000) Schulprogramm und Selbstevaluation als Kern von Qualitätsentwicklung und Qualitätssicherung. In: Eder F (Hg.), Qualitätsentwicklung und Qualitätssicherung im österreichischen Schulwesen. Forschungsbericht im Auftrag des BMBWK. Linz (Manuskript), 51-66*.

[44] On vocational training see the survey carried out by the FM of Education and Culture (1998) *Auswertung des Qualitätsnetzwerk-Fragebogens.* (http://www.qis.at/qn/qn.asp?sel=search)

[45] Cf. chapter 1. of this report

[46] *Cf. Haider G (2000) System-Monitoring. In: Eder F (Hg.), Qualitätsentwicklung und Qualitätssicherung im österreichischen Schulwesen. Forschungsbericht im Auftrag des BMBWK. Linz (Manuskript), 125-140.*

curriculum. This criticism was mainly directed at the excessive weight placed on traditional knowledge transfer in current practice, which would impair rather than promote new competencies, especially team orientation, but also presentation techniques or independent knowledge acquisition.[47] Some respondents maintained the contrary, stating that the conveyance of knowledge needed to be backed up (e.g. in the field of traditional core competencies) and should be reinforced. A further point of criticism related to the practice of pupils having to repeat an entire year if they failed individual subjects, which is considered inefficient.

- Developing standards, indicators and benchmarks for controlling at an aggregate level

At the level of co-ordination and controlling, there seems to be a shift of momentum towards the individual schools and a re-allocation of tasks between those involved in the co-ordination and controlling processes. These changes manifest themselves most importantly in the *definition of goals* and *outcome evaluation* being concentrated at (central) government level, and in a shift of momentum, in the *implementation of educational activities,* towards certain types of co-operation among the other parties involved in the process (schools, students, parents, regional units, social partners). The traditional bureaucratic *top-down* approach is abandoned in favour of more complex co-ordination and controlling processes, which also demand improved flows of information. The new approaches of quality development and quality assurance in the Austrian system of education take account of this development. At school level, a strategy has already been drawn up; it has been underlined that effective quality development must take all the different levels of education (instruction, school, region, overall system) into account. Elements (blocks) for system control in education have hence been outlined, but still need to be developed a lot further. To enable effective system control, the activities at the different levels must interact systematically, with knowledge transfer playing a pivotal role. The focus lies on activities at school level, which are centred around the school development plan as a cornerstone for self-evaluation. Knowledge transfer must operate bi-directionally (the lower levels send up control knowledge to the top, and the top levels send reference values down to the lower levels) and be backed by standards. Four potential lines of action have been suggested at the national level:[48]

- system monitoring and education statistics,
- focussed evaluations,
- national development projects,
- self-evaluation of the central school authority.

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[47] Participation in TIMMS yielded some unfavourable results and prompted a lasting initiative for the further development of mathematics and science instruction in the project “Innovation in Mathematics, Science and Technology Teaching (IMST^2)“ (http://imst.uni-klu.ac.at/).

[48] Cf. *Specht W (2000), Einführung: Funktionen und Strukturen nationaler Systemsteuerung. In: Eder F (Hg.), Qualitätsentwicklung und Qualitätssicherung im österreichischen Schulwesen. Forschungsbericht im Auftrag des BMBWK. Linz (Manuskript), 116-125*.

The setting of standards for key competencies and for specific subject-matter knowledge which, having been surveyed, could be used as a reference for development work at school level and should lend themselves to international comparison, is under debate. This process should base itself on the 1999 curriculum and, in a first step, define the objectives for year 7/8 of schooling.[49]

3. The Position of the Social Partners in Public Discourse

Interviews were conducted with selected representatives of the interest groups of employees (Austrian Association of Trade Unions and Chambers of Work) and employers (Federal Economic Chamber and Federation of Austrian Industry) to survey the standpoints of the social partners in the discourse on the definition and selection of competencies. The aim was to pinpoint the current positions against the backdrop of an analysis of recent material and demands that have been voiced.[50]

The survey set out to identify :

- the positions on the conceptual understanding and integration of the notions used in the debate (competencies, key skills, etc.), and on the "new" core competencies being required;

- how the Austrian system of education and policy are assessed with regard to preparing the individual for a successful life, and, by way of inference, the weak points, problems and needs for change that are recognised;

- views concerning the participation of the social partners in the definition and implementation of the required core competencies, respecting the different positions and conflicting interests;

- how measures and reforms relating to the development of core competencies are assessed, and what role the social partners play in this context.

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[49] Cf. *BMBWK (2001) Standards*. Documentation Folder of Directorate General I on the Workshop on "Key Competencies", 15 May 2001, Vienna.

[50] For the positions of these organisations in Austrian educational policy see: *Mayer K / Lassnigg L / Unger M (2000) Social Dialogue on Training. Case Study Austria, IHS-Forschungsbericht im Auftrag von CEDEFOP. Wien* (download: http://www.equi.at/en_fs_projekte.htm)

a. The positions of employee organisations (Austrian Association of Trade Unions, Chambers of Work)

Education and training are considered overriding concerns from the angle of competitiveness. The main policy demands concern the maintenance and upgrading of the educational programmes offered and their accessibility at all levels, including adult education, without social, gender-related or other restrictions. An important aspect is to ensure that the governmental framework is set in a democratic process, as well as ensuring the participation of all stakeholders. It is believed that education and training make a vital contribution to economic operations and to securing labour and employment. At the same time, their significance for the political and private spheres further beyond is stressed. Essentially, the economic development trends and the broader social and societal requirements are seen as being in congruence. "Forecasts on the additional skills required on the Austrian labour market suggest a need for a self-reliant and innovative workforce of highest professional standards who are able to work in teams."[51]

The changing requirements facing the individual are seen as resulting mainly from the growing complexity of living conditions and more individual ways of life. Accelerated change and the multiplication of options as well as the break-away from traditional structures also generate pressure and demands that cannot be coped with. Owing to these dynamics, there is a perception of mounting discrepancy between the values and conceptions of life handed over by generations of parents on the one hand, and the new living and working conditions on the other. The system of social security, as well as the regulations and agreements that prevail on the labour market, now stand in contrast to the dynamic developments with regard to skills and jobs. Another factor is the development of global quantity relations on the labour market: The requirements created by an oversupply of labour are different from those generated by a labour shortage. The new competencies are fitted into this system of interdependencies.

A changed socialisation function of school and new pedagogical methods which take account of more flexible and less hierarchical structures of employment is called for "in order to promote the social and self-competencies of pupils. (....) These new competencies are to widen the understanding of performance, which so far has been largely based on cognitive knowledge, technical skills and self-assertion. Emphasis is to be placed on creative/cultural education, which is conducive to promoting these competencies".[52]

There is no systematic approach to conceptualisation, a major difference between key skills and competencies is not made. Altogether, the assessment of competencies as an objective assessment of the outputs of education in terms of accountability or quality assurance does not carry much weight in the policy statements. Performance criteria are viewed as generating a

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[51] *ÖGB (1999) Arbeit statt Beschäftigung. 14. Bundeskongress des ÖGB, p.28*.
[52] Ibid., p.28.

conflict of interest in a system where grading is based on agreements reached by collective bargaining.

Asked about competency assessment, many respondents mentioned the two models of performance assessment which exist side by side in the Austrian system of education and even compete which one another to some degree: the *school-based model* and the *practical company-based model*. It is in this sense that the notion of (work-related) action competence is used in the statements (without, however, being made explicit on the theoretical and conceptual level): vocational training, in particular apprenticeship training, as well as practical work experience are seen as being interlinked with work-related action competence, whereas the school-based performance model tends to stress the selection function. Special reference is made to the competencies of working adults who opt for a second educational career, such as second-chance education, or as working students. It is widely felt that key competencies are acquired in practice, and that working students are "more in touch with real life".

The following competencies, without being placed in a systematic context, were considered as being increasingly important:

- language, communication, expression
- information and knowledge management, information and communication skills
- organising the learning process, research of material;
- social competencies
- lifestyle, life and career planning, self-management
- foreign languages, stays abroad
- political interest, democratic participation.

A two-fold duality has been diagnosed in the educational system with regard to the conveyance of competencies:

First, the duality of reproducible factual knowledge versus other competencies beyond the scope of the subject-matter, which, however, lacked a clear-cut conceptual definition. The notion most often used is that of key skills or key competencies, alongside terms such as soft skills, social competencies, social skills, or workplace qualifications.

Second, the duality of specialised vocational training versus broad training profiles and general education. While there seems to be a rather clear understanding of what specialisation means, the other pole is less clearly defined. This might be due to the complex understanding of the term

"general education" in the Austrian context, which still strongly adheres to the dichotomy of vocational versus general education and is inspired by the "classical ideal of education".[53]

Neither the need for subject-matter knowledge nor the special weight of vocational training is being questioned as a matter of principle; however, wider training profiles have been called for in many areas (specifically in apprenticeship training, but also in vocational training) and there seems to be a general feeling that the system of schooling is fraught excessively with reproducible subject-matter knowledge. The employee organisations have tried to make a contribution to the development of key competencies, both at the policy and at the practical levels (by a range of different activities in respect of their own further education or the development of supporting teaching tools, etc.); ".... as unionists we were always the first to call for the conveyance of key skills, in particular in vocational training".[54]

Scepticism prevails about how well the Austrian system of education conveys the required competencies, interestingly enough though, the question as to an objective assessment of such performance is not being raised. The general line of argument stresses the need to secure the required infrastructure and to strengthen inputs by extra investment.

The development of the educational system in the interest of employees is seen as being closely related to state-guaranteed framework conditions. The political attempts at deregulation and greater autonomy of the educational institutions pursued at the different levels by government and the school administration are viewed sceptically. Fears of growing social imbalance and sagging quality standards in the wake of financial austerity programmes are voiced. Both the Austrian Association of Trade Unions and the Chambers of Labour have pointed out the need for pedagogical improvements. In addition to maintaining and upgrading infrastructure, the question of a stronger linkage of contents and methodology in the curricula was raised - "the curricula should spell out not only *what* should be taught, but also *how*".

The changes in the system of education towards a stronger development of key or core competencies are rated as hardly noticeable, "a lot of lip service", the odd change in further education, in formalised training "not much has happened".

Participation of the social partners is seen as clearly geared to their involvement in the democratic process, the integration of the represented interests in the political consultation process and the participation of the stakeholders in decision-making processes in education (co-

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[53] The attemps to differentiate this notion by means of the foundation concept have not met with any attention so far; cf. OECD 1989, Pathways for Learning. Education and Training from 16 to 19, Paris: OECD; *Lassnigg L (1997). Zur bildungswissenschaftlichen Analyse der Oberstufe: Konzeptuelle Probleme und offene Fragen. In: E.Persy & E.Tesar (ed.), Die Zukunft der Schulen der Vierzehn- bis Neunzehnjährigen. Frankfurt/Main: Lang, p.242-255.*

[54] Cf. also information on the homepages under: http://www.akwien.or.at/; http://www.oegb.or.at/

determination). There is a definite preference for a government-regulated national system of education at all levels.[55]

The roles of the different players in competency development are perceived as changing, with a declining importance of parents and youth organisations in particular, and increasing importance of the media and the corporate world. The role of schools, too, is felt to be changing, but not decreasing. Teachers, who are currently the focus of political debate and reform (i.a. the question of the Service Code), are viewed as key players. This area is felt to harbour a wealth of problems and contradictions, some of which result from the clash between the traditional teacher profile and the changing requirements and dynamic development of their environment. The key issue is the need for further education for which adequate solutions are to be found in the negotiations between the trade unions and government as employer. Altogether, the employee organisations have long called for reforms in teacher training towards a more uniform profile and more attention being devoted to pedagogical training. This reform is now becoming all the more pressing, "there is a vast need for reform in teacher training with regard to the Service Code and, in general, the activity profile of teachers, etc."

Some conflicting interests between the stakeholder relating to competency development have been clearly depicted in the interviews and will be summarised in the following:

Specialisation versus breadth of skill profiles in vocational training was one conflict of interest dividing the two social partners, employers and employees, that was brought to the fore. The employee side has long pushed for wider skill profiles. Although companies in many branches would be interested in broader education, and have even practically implemented corresponding measures, the represented interests, accounting for the concerns of the quantitatively dominant small-sized enterprises, pursue a policy of narrow specialisation. The positions of the Economic Chamber and the Federation of Austrian Industry differ on this point.

A second, strongly emphasised conflict of interest exists between large- and small-scale companies. But for a few innovative small-scale companies, large-scale companies often unfold many activities in competency development (even though there is only insufficient empirical evidence to support this claim). Appropriate regulation and funding schemes are expected to bring about some improvement.

As to the field of further education, a conflict between corporate and social needs has been identified and stressed. Since corporate commitment to competency development is based on a

[55] The Chambers of Labour have compiled a list of demands for university reform which contains a current analysis of these views *(cf. AK-plus (2001) Für eine zukunftsweisende Hochschuloffensive. Positionspapier zur Universitätspolitik der Bundesregierung*.

"narrow sense of profitability", stronger public commitment to adult education has been called for so as to account for more general social and societal interests.

As far as greater flexibility and dynamics in the area of skills are concerned, a conflict of interest is perceived between the system of collective wage and working conditions on the one hand, and a system of pay grading based on performance criteria on the other. Performance-based grading, often a benefit for skilled and successful workers, could undermine existing agreements and is a potential threat for weaker and disadvantaged members of the workforce.

Ultimately, another conflict of interest with significant implications on education and competency development is the clash between austerity measures adopted to achieve a balanced budged and the need to invest in an improvement of the system of education.

The *Berufsreifeprüfung,* an examination which gives access to higher education and (partial) recognition of vocational competencies to individuals who do not hold a matriculation examination (in particular trained apprentices and graduates of secondary intermediate schools), has been singled out from the list of measures and reforms designed to improve competency development. It has been qualified as a "breakthrough" and as the "project of the century in terms of key competencies". The development of procedures for the certification of qualifications acquired at the workplace, in more general terms the de-coupling of competency assessment from school instruction, is considered a measure that holds a promise of success. Specific strategies to this end are not immediately available, reference is made to the NVQ system and the workplace qualifications in Scotland.

A number of methodological and organisational changes were suggested to strengthen the development of key competencies at school, some of which are already being implemented but need to be reinforced:

- project and interdisciplinary instruction,
- replacing superfluous detailed knowledge by more complex contents, "organising papal elections instead of memorising papal names",
- replacing inefficient repeat years by other methods,
- uniform standards and performance assessments,
- modular structures.

b. The positions of employer organisations (Federal Economic Chamber and Federation of Austrian Industry)

The employer organisations have adopted different positions on the competency issue. Since the 1990s, the Federation of Austrian Industry has continuously and systematically addressed the altered educational requirements caused by the changing world of work and employment in response to the advent of information society and globalisation. "This "new world of work" requires (...) to develop the ability and readiness to integration in changing job and work environments, to present and "market" personal performance and its benefits, and to find individually backed security, even in times of growing external insecurity, through orientation, skill enhancement ("life-long learning") and entrepreneurialism."[56]

The economic chambers embrace more traditional standpoints and have qualified the competency debate as "highly intellectual". Asked about the tasks of the educational system, the main concern is the preservation of time-proven elements: Specific work-related action competencies are viewed as being critical, i.e. specialist and concrete know-how and skills for a particular type of work as a basis of employability; stress was equally laid on the "old-fashioned" work ethics, the conveyance of knowledge and the consolidation of fundamental knowledge at school. The debate on key skills in the 1980s and 1990s identified a risk of ill-directed developments in that actual practical abilities, technical know-how and skills would be "no longer necessary" and would be replaced by "obscure pedagogical competencies".

The difference in focus between the Federation of Austrian Industry and the Economic Chamber might be due to the perception of the stronger dynamics in industrial enterprises. Particular emphasis is attributed to changes in the organisational set-up of companies (flat hierarchies, team-, project- and process orientation),[57] and it is in this very context that the organisational issues of mobilising the competencies of the workforce arise: "How must a company be organised to bring out the best of people's skills, *turning these skills into competencies*." Competence management might be seen as a new management principle.

The Federation of Austrian Industry has set up working groups of critical entrepreneurs who are elaborating visions for a renewal of the system of education against the backdrop of far-reaching economic and societal change.[58] A starting point are the changes at company level, which have a marked influence on job profiles. It is attempted to systematically relate the competency notion to corporate changes, differentiating between subject-matter competence, methodological

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[56] *Volkswirtschaftliche Gesellschaft /Industriellenvereinigung (1997) Qualifikation 2012. Bildungsanforderungen für eine Berufswelt im Wandel. Wien.*

[57] The flatter a company, the more valuable co-operation becomes, the higher the share of productivity coming from co-operation – this may be a reason why the corporate side has now strongly launched itself into this debate."

[58] See http://www.foehrenbergkreis.at/static/index.html

competence and social competence.[59] Basically, a difference is made between subject-matter competencies, subject-matter knowledge and know-how on the one hand, and competencies which allow for "target and results-oriented effectiveness" on the other.[60] Particular emphasis is placed on the complementary nature of subject-matter competence and "personal characteristics"; at the conceptual level, the notion of methodological and social competencies seems to overlap with "key or meta skills" or "key qualities and competencies". In contrast to the notion of key skills, the competency notion implies an orientation towards uses and results.

From the employer perspective, the main key competencies can be summarised as follows (here there is no difference between the Federation of Austrian Industry and the Federal Economic Chamber, but a different weighting of traditional versus new requirements):[61]

- the classical three R's (reading, writing, arithmetics)
- IT literacy, ICT skills at different levels[62]
- soft skills, particularly social skills, which promote the ability for teamwork, presentation skills
- foreign languages, international experience[63]
- economic interdependencies, entrepreneurial thinking
- work ethics as an integral feature of social competencies.

The Federal Economic Chamber in particular considers the Austrian educational model, with its large and growing share in the transmission of vocational skills, an asset (in contrast e.g. to the United States), the focus on vocational further education is also mentioned favourably in adult education. At school level, the conveyance, and in particular the consolidation and practising, of knowledge should be strengthened. Teachers should respond to the dynamics of knowledge becoming "obsolete" by selecting contents appropriately as permitted by the framework curricula. The two major problems identified in the educational system are its "inward looking perspective" and a "lacking sense of reality", a result of the self-reproduction of teachers[64] and the weight they carry in educational administration and policy. Altogether, the stability of the educational system was seen as favourable and it was considered positive that Austria had been able to fend off

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[59] Cf. e.g. *Wottreng S (1999) Handbuch Handlungskompetenz. Einführung in die Selbst-, Sozial- und Methodenkompetenz. Aarau: Sauerländer; Bader R (1997) Handlungsorientierung – akzeptiert und variiert. Die Berufsbildende Schule 49* (http://www. blbs.de/bpolitik/zeit01/blbsvz01.htm).

[60] Volkswirtschaftliche Gesellschaft / Industriellenvereinigung 1997, p. 42.

[61] The brochure *Qualifikation 2012* gives an extensive description of the required competencies; see *Volkswirtschaftliche Gesellschaft / Industriellenvereinigung 1997,* particularly chapterV.

[62] Cf. especially for this area *IV (2001) ikt.skills_für neue arbeitswelten. Herausforderungen und Chancen im Bereich der Informations- und Kommunikationstechnologien (IKT).*

[63] For a detailed positioning on the requirements resulting from internationalisation refer to: *IV (2000) Human Resources. Der Erfolgsfaktor im internationalen Wettbewerb*.

[64] "From education straight into education"; exception: the practice requirements in vocational training.

short-lived pedagogical and educational-policy trends (joint schooling for all pupils aged 10 to 14, autonomy) on the strength of the legal framework in force. Foreign languages and internationalisation were mentioned favourably as the top priorities of the 1990s, the new priority rightly had to be the promotion of information and communication technologies.

It was already in its 1997 publication that the Federation of Austrian Industry attempted to draw up a constructive analysis of the new requirements facing the system of education in terms of contents and subjects, as well as structure and organisation.[65] The main elements in the promotion of competency development are appropriate pedagogical work methods (project work and team work, interdisciplinary priorities, using case studies from real life, etc.). A development need has been identified particularly for the area of general education.

The current position paper[66] focuses more distinctly on the division of tasks between school and further education, given the difficulties arising from the shortage of qualified ICT staff. The task of schools is reduced to the fundamental educational objectives:

- 3 R's Plus (reading, writing, arithmetics, information and communication technologies),
- learning how to learn,
- social competence,
- ability to communicate,
- modelling (particularly emphasised as an explanatory principle and as a basis for transfer processes),
- ethical, cultural and humanist values,
- ethics and responsibility,
- curiosity, love of learning.

Asked about participation in competency development, opinions focus on the development of a partnership between industry and education at different levels. Emphasis is placed on co-operations between education, business and industry which are based on a dialogue about future requirements. Schools are essentially seen as service providers which, following the management model, should be fully accountable for their performance (headmasters as managers, enjoying independence in financial and staffing matters, and a corresponding leeway to set measures). Teachers are seen as key players; the service regulations, which lack sufficient performance incentives, are viewed as an obstacle to further development ("not motivating enough"), and blamed for the inefficient use of funds in initial education.

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[65] Cf. *Volkswirtschaftliche Gesellschaft / Industriellenvereinigung 1997*, chapter VI.
[66] *IV (2001) ikt.skills_für neue arbeitswelten. Herausforderungen und Chancen im Bereich der Informations- und Kommunikationstechnologien (IKT).*

Generally, there is no feeling of a conflict of interests between employers and employees, however, a difference in interests with regard to implementation has been conceded. Companies are said to be more target-oriented and interested in the usability of competencies; over the long term, however, standpoints seem to converge. The Federal Economic Chamber accentuates the differences between small and large-scale businesses more strongly than the Federation of Austrian Industry. Although the approaches still diverge for the time being, it is assumed that the "growing dynamics of the environment" will have its repercussions also on smaller businesses. The Federal Economic Chamber more strongly underlines the difficulties and obstacles which small-size businesses encounter, especially the problem of time. All in all, the hypothesis of impending social polarisation is explicitly rejected.

The most important conflict of interests is seen between initial and further education, as a re-allocation of funds would be regarded as necessary. While there is a vast need perceived for additional funding in further education, the outcome of initial education could also be achieved at lesser cost. Interestingly, the question as to an objective assessment of the performance of the educational system is not raised.

The following measures have been identified to promote competency development:

- project orientation at schools
- support for entrepreneurial projects[67]
- practice firms[68]
- engineering projects at secondary higher technical/vocational schools[69]
- *Berufsreifeprüfung (*matriculation examination for trained apprentices)

There is reservation concerning the accreditation of informally acquired competencies. The NVQ system is assessed rather sceptically, the French *balance de competences* model may hold interest, although its implementation might raise a large number of problems.

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[67] Within the framework of the JUNIOR project, pupils organise actual company set ups (http://www.junior.cc/index2.htm).

[68] Practice firms are an integral feature of the curriculum for secondary intermediate and higher schools of business and commerce and allow to simulate economic processes using the model of a real company. There are currently approx. 1000 practice firms in Austria (http://www.actif.at/).

[69] *BMUK (1998) Ingenieur/Technikerprojekte an technischen und gewerblichen Schulen im Schuljahr 1996/97. Wien.*

4. Summary and Conclusions on the Development of an Austrian Strategy

The Austrian system of education is characterised by strong vocational training at secondary higher level (apprenticeship training and full-time schooling), and by a duality of general and vocational education, which are competing principles to some extent. Traditionally, the objectives are largely regulated in all areas (with a trend towards deregulation and increased autonomy in recent years), and very exacting and broadly scoped, particularly in general education. In vocational education, the development of work-related action competence in the sense of the usability of formal qualifications, reflected by different approaches and opportunities to gain practical experience, has traditionally been important. There is some polarity between nation-wide, formal vocational qualifications and methods to recognise informal learning processes. Performance assessment focuses on examinations which are administered by teachers, which tends to enhance traditional methods of knowledge transfer. Objective methods of results assessment have played a minor role to date.

- *Information on national action to define key competencies as the envisaged results of the educational system or as a basis for assessment*

It is in particular since the 1990s, and hastened by the process of European integration, that different actors and different levels have launched measures to define, describe and determine key competencies at greater detail. The most noteworthy activities in education were two long-term measures: The development of a new curriculum for the secondary lower level (1999 curriculum), which introduced a new mandatory competency notion in the sense of a complementarity between subject-matter competence and self-competence/social competence for this phase of compulsory schooling. Accompanied by careful steps towards new steering models through school-based development, the new curriculum was embedded in a comprehensive system of measures designed to support its implementation, which has not been fully realised yet, however. Industry launched a process of several years that was designed to define the challenges and new requirements facing the system of education and submitted extensive suggestions for the definition of competencies needed, which are aimed at complementing subject-matter competence by methodological and social competence. There is far-reaching agreement and consensus that complementing the traditional conveyance of knowledge by new key competencies must necessarily go hand in hand with methodological reforms of educational practice. The reinforcement and development of methods which allow for real or simulated practical experience (projects in the widest sense of the word, but also practicals and practice firms) is an important line of action. In higher education, a comprehensive and conflict-ridden reform has been under way since the 1990s, which aims at a closer orientation towards social and economic practice.

Beyond the scope of the initiatives mentioned here, there has been a certain basic understanding of the need to develop competencies in a broader framework; however, the different elements of new competencies have not been clearly conceptualised (as of yet). These approaches and debates have been qualified by many sides as being of little help, also vis-à-vis traditional views. The approaches towards the definition of competencies differ between general and vocational education. Key issues and points of friction are a preoccupation with factual knowledge (know what) on the one hand, and a preoccupation with specialised vocational training (know how) on the other. There seems to be wide-ranging agreement about team orientation lacking a firm hold in the Austrian system of education.

The steps taken so far to define key competencies consisted mainly in describing the envisaged outcome of educational processes, whereas an objective evaluation by different forms of assessments has been discussed only at a rudimentary (highly controversial) level. Altogether, the material analysed and the interviews reveal that competence assessment was given hardly any attention at all, the main thrust lay on a verbal description and definition.

- *Identification of competencies considered relevant in the national context for major spheres of life as a step towards developing international consensus*

From the angle of different life spheres, some measure of conflict was diagnosed between (immediate) economic usability on the one hand, and the broader social, political and individual spheres of life on the other. This conflict manifests itself in the interaction of the different stakeholders, especially between general and vocational education. There is, however, an increasing perception of a complementarity of the new economic requirements and the wider social uses, even if conflicting aspects are emphasised. Two aspects in particular are seen as a source of conflict: the question of resources in the context of public fiscal policy, and the specific interests in use held by the large sector of SMEs in Austria, whose outlook is rather traditional.

The competencies considered relevant may be divided into general core competencies (reading, writing, arithmetics) and the new basic skills, which are broken down in five fields: IT skills, foreign languages, entrepreneurialism, social competencies, technological culture. In these fields, both traditional and new, there have been a wide range of different policy measures, most of which are largely input driven (creating infrastructure, wider access to learning opportunities, methodological reform, etc.). In contrast, the efforts to define the results of educational processes and to create transparency about the achievement of these results do not carry much weight.

- *Understanding how key competencies are embedded in the national education and evaluation strategies and are negotiated between the different interest groups*

Given the comprehensive regulation of contents (and of the formal qualifications), the revision and development of curricula in the widest sense is an important mechanism to embed the key competencies in educational policy plans. In the context of growing autonomy of educational

institutions, the second main thrust of development lies in building mechanisms for quality assurance and quality development. In school education, mechanisms of school-based organisational development using comprehensive self-evaluation instruments on the basis of a school development plan are significant approaches towards implementing these new competencies. However, these mechanisms have not been introduced on a mandatory basis as of yet.

Output-driven control mechanisms beyond the scope of the individual school and involvement in international assessments, as well as the development of national assessments, are still in a nascent stage. In this field, there is a clear readiness to participate in the current developments to implement the objectives of the Stockholm Council[70] within the framework of European educational policy.

It is difficult to assess the involvement of the different interest groups in the development of education and evaluation strategies at present, as many things are in flux owing to the current constellation of powers. Educational policy has been traditionally rooted in a consensus between government and the opposition, partly laid down in law, and partly subject to voluntary self-regulation. It is impossible to foresee to what extent new relations can thrive in this constellation of powers. There is considerable convergence between the social partners with regard to the new requirements, at the same time a sizeable potential for conflict exists between the employee positions and the major aspects of national education strategies.

Teachers, who are affected by major issues of the reform, occupy a crucial position and have a considerable influence on educational policy. Many stakeholders have apparently discerned a need of reforming processes in the entire system of education, and hence in the conditions of teaching and learning, in response to the new requirements. The allocation of resources, the service regulations, as well as the transparency of results come into play, and it is clear that the teachers undisputedly play a pivotal role in the process of competency development, in particular in implementing the new core competencies. Ideas about how to solve these questions cover a wide spectrum of opinions, also among the teachers themselves (from very cautious modifications of the status quo to a thorough re-organisation of the system of schooling and education based on the model of private-law employment in the services industry).

- *Understanding the national assessments of the DeSeCo project, in particular the conceptualisation of the three generic key competencies: the capability to act autonomously and*

[70] The Stockholm Council has clearly laid down three fundamental objectives: 1) increasing quality and effectiveness of education and training systems in the European Union, 2) facilitating access of all to the education and training systems, 3) opening up of education and training systems to the wider world. These objectives are specified in detail in the Report of the Council (Education) to the European Council "The Concrete Future Objectives in General and Vocational Education", Brussels, 14 February 2001.

reflectively, interactive use of tools in the widest sense; successful participation in heterogeneous groups

With regard to the national views on the conceptualisation of the core competencies, the debates are held at a high level of abstraction in the context of a comprehensive definition of objectives in the Austrian system of education. While being a "normal" part of educational policy, these lines of debate are seen as largely detached from practice, if not practically irrelevant altogether. To some degree, the lines of debate separate general and vocational education. Accordingly, the interviews conducted about this project revealed a considerable amount of scepticism vis-à-vis these new concepts among a wide group of players. It was a small innovative community which has advanced the discussions and development.

The systematic conceptual definitions which are available show close affinity to the three generic types of key competencies: self-competence, methodological competence, social competence.

- *Insight into the methods and national experience of assessing key competencies*

In the Austrian system of education, performance assessment focuses on traditional examinations administered by teachers in the sector of school education in the widest sense, and on the demonstration of practical experiences, which relatively more weight in practice-oriented vocational training. The outcomes of educational processes are not transparent in an objective sense, and are therefore assessed very differently. On the other hand, there are few attempts aiming at an objective assessment of results. The analyses and interviews conducted within the framework of this project did not reveal any pressing concerns in this direction.

Annex

'Core competencies': Selected propositions on the national discourse in Austria:[71]

1. The Austrian discourse is characterised by a non-Babylonian confusion of tongues:

    i. *Confusion of tongues:* In the debate, concepts/notions such as "key skills", "social skills", "cross-curricular competencies" or "dynamic skills" are used more or less synonymously and interchangeably.

    ii. *Non-Babylonian:* When using these concepts/notions, the stakeholders in this debate frequently seem to denote similar things and intend to point out similar aspects/dimensions or manifestations of education in modern complex societies.

2. The similarity or commonality in the use of these concepts/notions in the public debate lies in the fact that it emphasises a new quality of requirements which individuals are supposed to meet. Generally speaking, these new requirements relate to new technologies, economic change and on-going internationalisation. They strongly refer to the world of work, to political environments, and also to life settings involving the family or leisure time.

    i. The growing importance of core/key competencies in society is clearly pinpointed in a line of reasoning, mainly advanced by the employee side, which invokes the increasing complexity of modern knowledge societies.
    In the face of accelerated societal change and increasing complexity, individuals are faced with an ever growing number of decisions they must make.
    Traditionally, these decisions were strongly embedded in religious beliefs and socio-cultural environments, which have disintegrated, at least since the 1970s.
    The growing number of decisions (How should I invest my money? Which form of living should I opt for? To which school am I to send my children? What type of further training do I need? Which new technologies will I embrace and how can I master them?) is an enormous challenge for individuals which they must cope with by building core competencies.
    (note the risk that the process of competence building is slower than the process of change).

[71] The development of these propositions – which are based on 7 expert interviews conducted with representatives of government administration and interest groups, and the study of relevant ordinances, position papers, work documents etc – was a first and provisional step in the compilation of this report. These propositions have been presented and discussed in a workshop organised by the Federal Ministry of Education on "Key competencies" on 15 May 2001. The comments and statements contributed to this debate have been included in the report.

ii. Another line of reasoning, mainly used by the employer side, focuses on the increasing importance of core/key competencies in companies in the context of a general trend of corporate re-engineering towards flatter hierarchies, process and project orientation. Flat hierarchies and network organisations presuppose stepped-up communication and co-operation and require the development of core competencies by employees.

iii. In both cases – as well as in other arguments put forward in the discourse – competencies are implicitly understood to mean the resources of the individual to act independently/self-reliantly in response to a changing environment (interpreting situations, designing plans of action, organising implementation) as against the repetitive practice of reproducing pre-defined sets of knowledge and of action.
All players concede that the individual increasingly needs such resources in working life, in other areas of public life and in the private sphere, as the selection of relevant information is becoming increasingly difficult in the face of the runaway multiplication of information, whilst relevant information needs to be selected for an increasing number of decision-making processes. The competency notion is therefore strongly linked to the information or knowledge society.

3. In spite of this comprehensive implicit understanding, the reply the social players provide to the explicit question as to which competencies modern and complex knowledge societies need is a classical one, which is oriented towards traditional concepts of “skills” and “key skills”.

   i. The three R’s (reading, writing, arithmetics)

   ii. ICT literacy, foreign languages and communication skills

   iii. Key skills (team skills, decision-making capabilities, flexibility and self-directed learning, information management)

4. Moreover, interest group representatives place a strong focus on the world of business and employment in their understanding of the competency notion. Although they consider competencies in other spheres of life important, this is not seen as an end in its own right. This focus seems to be all the more pronounced on the employer side than on the employee side.

5. In general, the stakeholders in the public discourse do not base themselves on a theoretical underpinning or reference for the competency notion in that they would quote scientific research or academic literature on the notion of competency. They invoke the public discourse which they purport to tie in with ("*the notion of competency as used in public discourse").*

    i. The public administration is an exception: the work and advice of professor Posch (Klagenfurt University) and other experts were relied on in the design of the 1999 curriculum, which incorporated the notion of competency.

6. The development of key competencies requires major changes on the part of the major stakeholders, which define the setting for the development of key competencies.

    i. School:
        - from subject orientation towards project orientation;
        - increased project orientation and group work within the subjects;
        - from transmitting contents to defining learning environments;
        - regionalisation, setting of priorities and competence profiles for schools, whilst raising standards and ensuring their transparency (definition of modules)

    ii. Teachers:
        - lacking performance incentives in the Service Code, overly centralist and hierarchical structures;
        - massive changes in in-service teacher training;
        - closer co-operation between teachers and companies ("permanent updating of skills")

    iii. Companies:
        - from traditional seminars to learning on the job ("from teaching to learning")
        - learning and further education for all employees
        - co-operation with training organisations.

7. Core/key competencies engender new social polarisation in complex knowledge societies.

    i. innovative high-tech companies and groups versus SMEs in traditional branches of industry;

    ii. individuals who already possess certain formal and key qualifications versus individuals who do not attain minimum levels of formal and key qualifications;

iii. the promotion of key competencies must therefore go hand in hand with the promotion of improved permeability in the educational system.

iv. an issue of debate is the recognition/validation of informal learning processes.

8. The following important measures/reforms/political processes to promote the development of key competencies have been identified:

i. *Berufsreifeprüfung* (=limited entitlement to enrol in university studies for trained apprentices)

ii. integration of the competency notion in the 1999 curriculum and introduction of educational fields;

iii. pilot schools within the framework of the 1999 curriculum;

iv. intensifying project orientation at schools in general and incorporation of vocational orientation in the law;

v. practice firms;

vi. new further education courses that are geared to project management, conflict solving etc.

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